

PATENT APPLICATION
MICROFLUIDIC VISCOMETER

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MICROFLUIDIC VISCOMETER

CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. Application No. 10/008,604 filed on November 9, 2001, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Application No. 09/792,435 filed on February 23, 2001 which claims the benefit of priority from U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/216,793 filed on July 7, 2000, and from U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/184,390 filed February 23, 2000. The full disclosures of these references are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention is generally related to analytical tools for the biological and chemical sciences, and in a particular embodiment, provides microfluidic devices, systems, and methods for determining the viscosity of fluids within microfluidic channels of a microfluidic network, optionally without adding dye (or other agents) which can alter the properties of the fluids.

[0003] Microfluidic systems are now in use for the acquisition of chemical and biological information. These microfluidic systems are often fabricated using techniques commonly associated with the semiconductor electronics industry, such as photolithography, wet chemical etching, and the like. As used herein, "microfluidic" means a system or device having channels and chambers which are at the micron or submicron scale, e.g., having at least one cross-sectional dimension in a range from about 0.1 μm to about 500 μm .

[0004] Applications for microfluidic systems are myriad. Microfluidic systems have been proposed for capillary electrophoresis, liquid chromatography, flow injection analysis, and chemical reaction and synthesis. Microfluidic systems also have wide ranging applications in rapidly assaying compounds for their effects on various chemical, and preferably, biochemical systems. These interactions include the full range of catabolic and anabolic reactions which occur in living systems, including enzymatic, binding, signaling, and other reactions.

[0005] A variety of methods have been described to effect the transport of fluids between a pair of reservoirs within a microfluidic system or device. Incorporation of mechanical micro

pumps and valves within a microfluidic device has been described to move the fluids within a microfluidic channel. The use of acoustic energy to move fluid samples within a device by the effects of acoustic streaming has been proposed, along with the use of external pumps to directly force liquids through microfluidic channels.

[0006] The capabilities and use of microfluidic systems advanced significantly with the advent of electrokinetics: the use of electrical fields (and the resulting electrokinetic forces) to move fluid materials through the channels of a microfluidic system. Electrokinetic forces have the advantages of direct control, fast response, and simplicity, and allow fluid materials to be selectively moved through a complex network of channels so as to provide a wide variety of chemical and biochemical analyses. An exemplary electrokinetic system providing variable control of electro-osmotic and/or electrophoretic forces within a fluid-containing structure is described in U.S. Patent No. 5,965,001, the full disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0007] Despite the above-described advancements in the field of microfluidics, as with all successes, still further improvements are desirable. For example, while electrokinetic material transport systems provide many benefits in the micro-scale movement, mixing, and aliquoting of fluids, the application of electrical fields can have detrimental effects in some instances. In the case of charged reagents, electrical fields can cause electrophoretic biasing of material volumes, e.g., highly charged materials moving to the front or back of a fluid volume. Where transporting cellular material is desired, elevated electrical fields can, in some cases, result in a perforation or electroporation of the cells, which may effect their ultimate use in the system.

[0008] To mitigate the difficulties of electrokinetic systems, simplified transport systems for time domain multiplexing of reagents has been described in WO 00/45172 (assigned to the assignee of the present invention), the full disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. Still further alternative fluid transport mechanisms and control methodologies to enhance the flexibility and capabilities of known microfluidic systems, including multiple modulated pressure-driven techniques, have been described in International Application No. PCT/US01/05960, the full disclosure of which is also incorporated herein by reference.

[0009] Regardless of the mechanism used to effect movement of fluid and other materials within a microfluidic channel network, accuracy and repeatability of microfluidic flows can be problematic. Quality control can be challenging in light of variability of the fluids making up these flows, and accurate control over microfluidic flows in applications such as high throughput screening would benefit significantly from stable and reliable assays. It would also be beneficial to

determine additional characteristics of the fluids flowing within the microfluidic channels of a microfluidic network.

[0010] In light of the above, it would be advantageous to provide improved microfluidic devices, systems, and methods. It would be desirable if these improved techniques allowed better control over the flows within a microfluidic network, and/or increased the information provided by the microfluidic systems regarding one or more of the characteristics of the fluids flowing within a microfluidic channel of the network. It would be particularly beneficial if these enhanced techniques provided real-time and/or quality control feedback on the actual flows, ideally without relying on significantly increased system complexity or cost.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0011] The present invention generally provides improved microfluidic devices, systems, and methods. The devices and systems of the invention generally allow the characteristics of a fluid within in a microfluidic system to be determined, often using high-throughput techniques. In many embodiments, the invention will determine the viscosity of one or more sample fluids within a microfluidic channel network of a microfluidic body. The microfluidic networks will generally include at least one flow-resisting channel segment, and viscosity may be determined by flowing the sample fluid through the channel segment, often without altering the sample viscosity by adding any detectable marker (such as fluorescent dyes or the like) to the fluid before it flows through the channel segment. These techniques can also allow the use of dyes which are not normally compatible with a particular sample fluid, for example, dyes which are not soluble or the like. The viscosity may be determined by mixing the sample fluid with a detectable marker at an intersection downstream of the flow-resisting channel segment, with the mixing characteristics at the intersection indicating the pressure drop along the channel segment (and hence the viscosity of the sample fluid). Viscosities may be determined by comparing the flow characteristics of the sample fluid with a reference fluid having a known viscosity. The sensing range may be enhanced using a plurality of flow-resisting channel segments and/or detectable fluid channel intersections.

[0012] In a first aspect, the invention provides a microfluidic viscometer system comprising a microfluidic channel network including a first flow-resisting channel segment. A sensor coupled to the first segment of the network determines a viscosity of a sample fluid therein.

[0013] In many embodiments, a body having channel walls will define the network. The network will often include a plurality of channels with one or more intersections therebetween. A

flow generator coupled to the network can induce a flow of the sample fluid within the first segment. A first intersection may be in communication with the first segment, with the sensor coupled to the network at a sensor location disposed downstream of the first segment. This allows the sensor to sense a change in the flow which propagates from the first intersection to the sensor location so as to determine the viscosity of the sample fluid.

[0014] In some embodiments, the change in flow may comprise a pulse of a detectable fluid introduced at the first intersection, which may be upstream of the first segment. The system can then determine the viscosity of the sample fluid using a steady state propagation of the flow (which includes the detectable fluid pulse) from the intersection through the first segment and to the sensor location. In such embodiments, it is possible that the presence of the detectable fluid pulse may, to some extent, alter the characteristics (including the viscosity) of the sample fluid flowing through the first segment. Related embodiments may make use of a step-function change in flow of a detectable fluid.

[0015] In alternative embodiments, the first segment may be disposed upstream of the first intersection. The flow may define a ratio between a quantity of a sample fluid in the flow and a quantity of a detectable fluid in the flow, the detectable fluid being detectable by the sensor and traversing a second flow-resisting channel segment between a detectable fluid source and the intersection. By monitoring the changes in the mixing ratio, typically by monitoring the strength of a detectable signal provided from the mixed flow, a processor coupled to the sensor can determine the viscosity of the sample fluid. Advantageously, the viscosity sensing techniques of the present invention are particularly well-suited for sequential viscosity measurements of a plurality of sample fluids, particularly when the fluids are transferred along a fluid introduction channel in the form of a capillary extending or protruding from the microfluidic body.

[0016] In a method aspect, the invention comprises determining a viscosity of a sample fluid. The method comprises altering a flow of a flow-restricting microfluidic channel segment. The viscosity of the sample fluid may be determined by monitoring the altered flow.

[0017] In many embodiments, a first flow of a reference fluid through the flow-resisting channel will be monitored, the reference fluid having a known viscosity. A second flow through the flow-resisting channel will also be monitored, the second flow comprising the sample fluid. The viscosity of the sample fluid may be determined at least in part by comparing the first and second flows, with calculations based in part on the known viscosity of the reference fluid. The first and second flows may be monitored by a sensor disposed downstream of the flow-resisting channel with

an intersection disposed between the flow resisting channel and the sensor. The flows can be monitored by sensing a ratio of the sample fluid to a detectable fluid. Advantageously, a plurality of sample fluids can be sequentially transferred to the flow-resisting channel segment, allowing the viscosities of the samples to be determined in a high-throughput manner. In some embodiments, fluids may be dispensed and/or mixed within a microfluidic network, for example, allowing viscosities of fluid mixtures to be determined as a function of their composition.

[0018] In another aspect, the invention comprises a microfluidic channel network including a first flow-resisting channel segment. A sensor is coupled to the network for sensing flows through the first segment. A processor is coupled to the sensor. The processor derives a viscosity of a sample fluid by comparing first and second flows through the first segment.

[0019] The system may further include a reference fluid disposed within the network. The first flow may comprise the reference fluid, and the second flow may comprise the sample fluid. In many embodiments, the second flow within the first segment may be substantially composed of the sample fluid. The processor may calculate the viscosity of the sample fluid based at least in part on a viscosity of the reference fluid.

[0020] In many embodiments, a second flow-resisting channel segment will be coupled to the first segment at a first intersection. A first detectable fluid may be disposed within the second segment. The first intersection can be downstream of the first segment, and the sensor can monitor the flow through the first segment by sensing a quantity of the first detectable fluid added to the flow at the first intersection. Still further additional flow resisting channel segments may be coupled to the first segment by additional intersections. The intersections may be separated by associated flow-resisting channel segments, and the sensor may monitor the flow by sensing a quantity of the first detectable fluid added to the flow at the intersection. Alternatively, one or more additional flow-resisting channel segments may be couple to the first segment, with the sensor monitoring the flow through the first segment by sensing a quantity of a second detectable fluid added to the flow through the third segment. In such embodiments, the second and third segments may have differing resistances to flows therein. The first and second detectable fluids may be independently detectable by the sensor, for example, comprising dyes having differing color signatures.

[0021] The first segment may comprise a channel having a locally enhanced resistance to flows therein. For example, the channel region may have a reduced cross-sectional dimension, such

as a reduced depth, a reduced width, or the like. Alternatively, a flow occluding structure may be disposed within the channel.

[0022] The first flow may comprise a reference fluid having a known viscosity, and the second flow may comprise a combination of the sample fluid and a detectable fluid. This combination can define a ratio, with the processor identifying the ratio from a signal produced by the sensor. For example, the sensor may sense a light signal generated by a fluorescent dye of the detectable fluid, with a relative strength of the fluorescence indicating the ratio.

[0023] In many embodiments, the processor may derive the viscosity of the sample fluid by determining a rate of change of a signal generated by the sensor. In some embodiments, the processor may derive the viscosity of the sample fluid by determining a magnitude of a change of a signal generated by the sensor. The processor may determine the sample viscosity throughout a range of at least about two orders of magnitude of cp units, preferably through a range of at least three orders of magnitude of cp units. The processor may determine the sample viscosity throughout at least a range from about 1 cp to 100 cp, preferably from about 1 cp to 1000 cp, and optionally from 0.1cp to 1000 cp. By, for example, simply altering driving pressures, larger viscosities may be sensed, i.e., 1,000cp - 100,000cp. Hence, at least viscosities throughout ranges of at least 2 or 3 orders of magnitude may be sensed.

[0024] A microfluidic system may optionally include a sample fluid source which includes a plurality of sample fluids and a sample fluid introduction channel. The sample fluids may then be sequentially transferable along the fluid introduction channel to the flow resisting channel so as to sequentially determine viscosities of the sample fluid. The sample introduction channel may comprise a capillary extending from the microfluidic body, with the capillary being extendable sequentially into the sample fluids. Generally, the capillary will have significantly less resistance to flow than the first segment.

[0025] In yet another embodiment, the invention provides a microfluidic system comprising a microfluidic body having a network of channels. A flow generator induces a flow within the network, and a sensor transmits a signal indicating a time of the flow. A processor effects feedback control of the flow in response to the time signal. Optionally, the processor may determine a viscosity for use in the feedback control loop.

[0026] Yet another embodiment of the invention provides a microfluidic system comprising first and second immiscible fluids. A microfluidic body having a network of channels combines

the fluids therein, and a sensor is coupled to the network so as to define a viscometer. The viscometer measures interfacial properties of the combined fluid.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0027] Fig. 1 schematically illustrates a microfluidic system having a multi-reservoir pressure modulation system according to the principles of the present invention.

[0028] Fig. 2 is a plan view of a representative microfluidic device having microfluidic channels with enhanced fluid flow resistance for use in the microfluidic system of Fig. 1.

[0029] Figs. 3A and 3B are perspective views of a pressure manifold for releasably sealing reservoirs of the microfluidic device of channel 2 in fluid communication with the pressure modulators of the system of Fig. 1.

[0030] Fig. 4 schematically illustrates a control system for independently varying reservoir pressures in the microfluidic system of Fig. 1.

[0031] Figs. 5A-C schematically illustrate a method and computer program for determining pressures to provide a desired flow within a channel of the microfluidic network in the microfluidic device of Fig. 2.

[0032] Fig. 6 schematically illustrates a microfluidic system having both a multi-reservoir pressure modulation system and an electrokinetic fluid transportation and control system according to the principles of the present invention.

[0033] Figs. 7A and 7B illustrate well-pair dilution in which concentration variations are produced by selectively varying the relative flow rates from two reservoirs connected at an intersection.

[0034] Figs. 7C-E graphically illustrate measured dilution vs. set or intended dilution for a multi-reservoir pressure controlled well-pair dilution.

[0035] Figs. 8 and 8A-8D graphically illustrate an enzyme assay using a multi-reservoir pressure controlled microfluidic system, and more specifically: Fig. 8 illustrates the reaction, Fig. 8A is a titration curve for different substrate concentrations, Fig. 8B is a plot of the corrected signal verses substrate concentration, Fig. 8C is a plot for determination of the Michaelis constant, and Fig. 8D is a substrate titration plot.

[0036] Figs. 9A-C illustrate a microfluidic Protein Kinase A (PKA) reaction assay with variations in concentration achieved using hydrodynamic pressure modulation.

[0037] Figs. 10A and 10B illustrate a mobility shift assay microfluidic network and assay test results at different concentrations.

[0038] Figs. 11A and 11B are a perspective and plane view, respectively, of an exemplary hydrodynamic and electrokinetic interface structure for coupling to a microfluidic body.

[0039] Fig. 12 schematically illustrates an exemplary microfluidic viscometer.

[0040] Figs. 13A , 13B, and 13C schematically illustrate microfluidic networks and method for imposing detectable signals on a microfluidic flow for measurement of flow characteristics which can be used to calculate pressures to affect a desired flow, for viscometry, and the like.

[0041] Figs. 14A and 14B graphically illustrate flow characteristic signals which may be used to determine effective viscosity.

[0042] Fig. 15 is a perspective view of a microfluidic chip having a plurality of capillaries for spontaneous injection of fluids into the microfluidic network, typically by introducing the capillaries into fluid sources to bring the fluid into the chip in a controlled fashion.

[0043] Fig. 16 is a top view of a simple microfluidic chip having a single capillary for spontaneous injection.

[0044] Figs. 16A-16C graphically illustrate methods for monitoring progress of perturbations induced by spontaneous injection of fluids, for use in determining characteristics of a flow and/or microfluidic network.

[0045] Figs. 17A and 17B are perspective and plan view of fluorogenic multi-capillary chips.

[0046] Figs. 18A and 18B are perspective and plan view of a mobility-shift capillary chip.

[0047] Fig. 19 graphically illustrates the detection of a perturbation generated at an intersection of microfluidic channels by spontaneous injection.

[0048] Fig. 20 schematically illustrates a microfluidic network for use in a microfluidic system for determining a viscosity of a sample fluid without adding dyes, or the like, so as to distort the viscosity measurement, and/or to allow the use of dyes that are not compatible with the sample.

[0049] Figs. 21A and 21B schematically illustrate signals provided by the sensor of the microfluidic network of Fig. 20, allowing determination of a viscosity of a sample fluid relative to a known viscosity of a reference fluid.

[0050] Fig. 22 schematically illustrates a microfluidic network in which a locally enhanced flow resistance region is used as a portion of a viscometer.

[0051] Figs. 23A and 23B schematically illustrate signals provided by the sensor associated with the network of Fig. 22.

[0052] Fig 24 schematically illustrates yet another alternative microfluidic network for use in a microfluidic viscometer system in which a series of sequential channel segments are coupled to a series of detectable fluid sources at a series of intersections so as to determine viscosities throughout a wide range.

[0053] Fig. 25 schematically illustrates a microfluidic viscometry network in which independently detectable fluids are coupled to a sample fluid flow resisting channel by detectable fluid channel segments having differing flow resistance so as to identify sample fluid viscosities throughout a wide range.

[0054] Fig. 26 schematically illustrates a system for sequentially introducing sample fluids into a microfluidic body.

[0055] Figs. 27-33 graphically illustrate measurements and computer model data for determining viscosity and calibrating viscosity measurements.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS

[0056] The present invention will provide improved microfluidic devices, systems, and methods. The systems of the present invention will often determine a viscosity (or other characteristics) of a sample fluid by making use of the resistance to flow present within the small channels of a microfluidic network. Viscosities may be determined without, for example, adding fluorescent dyes or other detectable substances in a manner which could alter or distort the indicated viscosity. Toward that end, the fluid sample may flow through a flow resisting channel while sample fluid is substantially free of a substance which is detectable to the sensor.

[0057] As used herein, a sample is “substantially free” of a detectable substance if an associated viscosity sensor does not receive a sufficient signal from the detectable substance so as to identify the presence or speed of the detectable substance. It should be noted that such detectable substances may be, and often are, added to the sample fluid flow downstream of the flow-resisting channel segment. Nonetheless, as it flows through the flow-resisting channel segment (and hence as its viscosity is measured) the fluid may still be substantially free of the detectable substance. As used herein, a sensor having a detection region in fluid communication with a microfluidic network (or some component thereof) is encompassed within the term “a sensor coupled to” the microfluidic network (or component thereof).

[0058] Preferably, viscosities of fluid samples of no more than about 30 μl may be determined, ideally providing viscosities with fluid samples volumes of less than 5 μl . In fact, only a few (about 3 or more) nanoliters of a sample fluid may be brought into the network, so that viscosities of this quantity of fluid or more may be determined in some embodiments, with many embodiments able to measure as little as 10 nanoliters, typically allowing samples of 100 nanoliters or more to be measured. When used to determine viscosities, flow of a sample fluid may be generated by applying positive-gauge pressures, by applying vacuum or negative-gauge pressures, by electrokinetic microfluidic techniques, or the like. When a fluid sample flows through a flow-resisting channel, the pressure loss may be determined by providing an intersection downstream of the flow-resisting channel segment. Specifically, by coupling a detectable fluid source to the intersection via a second flow resisting channel segment, and (for example) drawing a vacuum downstream of the intersection, the sample and detectable fluid will be drawn and mixed in a ratio which depends in part on the viscosities of the sample and detectable fluid. Determination of the viscosity of a particular sample fluid may be simplified by flowing a reference fluid through the flow-resisting channel so as to calibrate the signal provided by a downstream sensor.

[0059] The present invention optionally makes use of a multi-reservoir pressure controller coupled to a plurality of independently variable pressure modulators to effect movement of fluids within microfluidic networks. By selectively controlling and changing the pressure applied to the reservoirs of a microfluidic device, hydrodynamic flow at very low flow rates may be accurately controlled within intersecting microfluidic channels. Such pressure-induced flows can help to decrease (or entirely avoid) any detrimental effects of the electrical fields associated with electrokinetic transportation methods, such as sample bias, cell perforation, electroporation, and the like. Additionally, such pressure-induced microfluidic flows may, through proper chip design, reduce flow variabilities as compared to electrokinetic techniques through the use of pressure differentials (and/or channel resistances that are significantly greater than flow variations induced by secondary effects, such as inflow/outflow capillary force differentials within the reservoirs). Advantageously, the pressure-induced flows of the present invention may also be combined with electrokinetic and/or other fluid transportation mechanisms thereby providing composite pressure/electrokinetic microfluidic systems.

[0060] The techniques of the present invention will often make use of data regarding the network of channels within a microfluidic device. This network data may be calculated using a model of the microfluidic network, measured by testing a microfluidic device, sensed using a

sensor, and/or the like. The network data will often be in the form of hydrodynamic resistances along microfluidic channel segments connecting nodes, with the nodes often being intersections between channels, ports or reservoirs, connections between channel segments having differing cross-sectional dimensions and/or flow characteristics, and the like. As used herein, the term “reservoir” encompasses ports for interfacing with a microfluidic network within a microfluidic body, including ports which do not have cross-sections that are much larger than the microfluidic channel to enhance fluid capacity.

[0061] By selectively controlling the pressure at most or all of the reservoirs of a microfluidic system, very small flow rates may be induced through selected channel segments. Such small pressure-induced flows can be accurately controlled at flow rates which might be difficult and/or impossible to control using alternative fluid transportation mechanisms. Advantageously, the present invention may provide flow rates of less than 0.1 nanoliters per second, the flow rates often being less than 1 nanoliters per second, and the pressure induced flow rates typically being less than 10 nanoliters per second within the microfluidic channel.

[0062] To accurately apply the pressures within the microfluidic network, the invention may make use of a pressure transmission system having relatively large lumens coupling the pressure modulators to the reservoirs of the microfluidic device, with the pressure transmission lumens ideally containing a compressible gas. Pressure is often transmitted through this relatively low resistance pressure transmission system to fluids disposed within the reservoirs of the microfluidic system via a gas/fluid interface within the reservoir. The resistance of the microfluidic channels to the fluid flows therein is typically much greater than the resistance of the pressure transmission lumens to the associated flow of compressible gas. Generally, the channel resistance is at least 10 times the transmission system resistance, preferably being at least 100 times, and ideally being at least 1000 times the transmission system resistance of the compressible gas used to induce the channel flows. In other words, a response time constant of the pressure transmission system will generally be lower than the time constant of the channel network, preferably being much lower, and ideally being at least one, two, or three orders of magnitude lower. The head space of a fluid (for example, in the pressure modulator pump and/or in the port or reservoir) times the resistance of the fluid flow (for example, in the channels or lumens) may generally define the response time constant.

[0063] It is often advantageous to enhance the resistance of the microfluidic channels to provide the desired relative resistance factors. The channels may have reduced cross-sectional dimensions, pressure drop members (such as a small cross-section pressure orifice, a flow

restricting substance or coating, or the like), and/or lengths of some, most, or even all of the microfluidic channel segments may be increased by including serpentine segment paths. As the resistance of the pressure transmission system can be several orders of magnitude less than the resistance of the channels, pressure differentials can be accurately transmitted from the pressure modulators to the reservoirs of the microfluidic device. Additionally, reduced transmission system resistances can help to enhance the response of the pressure system, providing a faster response time constant.

[0064] Referring now to Fig. 1, a microfluidic system 10 includes a microfluidic device 12 coupled to a bank of pressure modulators 14 by a pressure transmission system 16. Pressure modulator bank 14 includes a plurality of pressure modulators 14a, 14b, . . . Modulator bank 14 will generally include at least three independently, selectively variable pressure modulators, typically having at least four modulators, and ideally having eight or more modulators. Each modulator is in fluid communication with a reservoir 18 of microfluidic device 12 via an associated tube 20, the tube having a pressure transmission lumen with a compressible gas therein.

[0065] Modulator bank 14 generally provides independently selectable pressures to the lumens of tubing 20 under the direction of a controller(s) 22. Feedback may be provided to controller 22 from pressure sensors 24, as will be described hereinbelow. Processor 22 will often comprise a machine-readable code embodied by a tangible media 26, with the machine-readable code comprising program instructions and/or data for effecting the methods of the present invention. Processor 22 may comprise a personal computer having at least an Intel Pentium® or Pentium II® processor having a speed of at least 200 MHz, 300 MHz, or more. Tangible media 26 may comprise one or more floppy disks, compact disks, or “CDs,” magnetic recording tape, a read-only memory, a random access memory, or the like. In some embodiments, the programming instructions may be input into controller 22 via a disk drive or other input/output system such as an internet, intranet, modem reservoir, or the like. Suitable programs may be written in a variety of programming languages, including the LabView™ language, as available from National Instruments of Austin, Texas. Controller 22 transmits drive signals to modulator bank 14, ideally via an RS232/RS485 serial connection.

[0066] In addition to tubing 20, pressure transmission system 16 includes a manifold 28. Manifold 28 releasably seals the lumen of each tube 20 with an associated reservoir 18 of microfluidic device 12. Tubing 20 may comprise a relatively high-strength polymer such as polyetheretherketone (PEEK), or a polytetrafluoroethylene (such as a Teflon™ material), or the

like. The tubing typically has an inner diameter in a range from about 0.01" to about 0.05", with a length from about 1m to about 3m. A "T" connector couples the pressure output from each pressure modulator to an associated pressure sensor 24.

[0067] Each modulator 14a, 14b . . . generally comprises a pump or other pressure source which pressurizes the compressible gas within the lumen of associated tubing 20. The modulators preferably comprise positive displacement pumps, with the exemplary modulators comprising a piston which is selectively positioned within a surrounding cylinder by an actuator. Preferably, the actuators are adapted to allow accurate positioning of the piston in response to drive signals from controller 22, the exemplary actuators comprising stepper motors. The exemplary piston/cylinder arrangement is similar to a syringe. Exemplary modulator banks may be provided by (or modified from components available through) a variety of commercial sources, including Kloehn of Las Vegas, Nevada, Cavaro of Sunnyvale, California, and the like.

[0068] Microfluidic device 12 is seen more clearly in Fig. 2. Microfluidic device 12 includes an array of reservoirs 18a, 18b, . . . coupled together by microscale channels defining a microfluidic network 30. As used herein, the term "microscale" or "microfabricated" generally refers to structural elements or features of a device which have at least one fabricated dimension in the range of from about 0.1 μm to about 500 μm . Thus, a device referred to as being microfabricated or microscale will include at least one structural element or feature having such a dimension. When used to describe a fluidic element, such as a passage, chamber or conduit, the terms "microscale", "microfabricated" or "microfluidic" generally refer to one or more fluid passages, chambers or conduits which have at least one internal cross-sectional dimension, e.g., depth, width, length, diameter, etc., that is less than 500 μm , and typically between about 0.1 μm and about 500 μm . In the devices of the present invention, the microscale channels or chambers preferably have at least one cross-sectional dimension between about 0.1 μm and 200 μm , more preferably between about 0.1 μm and 100 μm , and often between about 0.1 μm and 50 μm .

[0069] The microfluidic devices or systems of the present invention typically include at least one microscale channel, usually at least two intersecting microscale channel segments, and often, three or more intersecting channel segments disposed within a single body structure. Channel intersections may exist in a number of formats, including cross intersections, "T" intersections; or any number of other structures whereby two channels are in fluid communication.

[0070] The body structures of the devices which integrate various microfluidic channels, chambers or other elements may be fabricated from a number of individual parts, which when

connected form the integrated microfluidic devices described herein. For example, the body structure can be fabricated from a number of separate capillary elements, microscale chambers, and the like, all of which are connected together to define an integrated body structure. Alternatively and in preferred aspects, the integrated body structure is fabricated from two or more substrate layers which are mated together to define a body structure having the channel and chamber networks of the devices within. In particular, a desired channel network is laid out upon a typically planar surface of at least one of the two substrate layers as a series of grooves or indentations in that surface. A second substrate layer is overlaid and bonded to the first substrate layer, covering and sealing the grooves, to define the channels within the interior of the device. In order to provide fluid and/or control access to the channels of the device, a series of reservoirs or reservoirs is typically provided in at least one of the substrate layers, which reservoirs or reservoirs are in fluid communication with the various channels of the device.

[0071] A variety of different substrate materials may be used to fabricate the devices of the invention, including silica-based substrates, i.e., glass, quartz, fused silica, silicon and the like, polymeric substrates, i.e., acrylics (e.g., polymethylmethacrylate) polycarbonate, polypropylene, polystyrene, and the like. Examples of preferred polymeric substrates are described in commonly owned published international patent application no. WO 98/46438 which is incorporated herein by reference for all purposes. Silica-based substrates are generally amenable to microfabrication techniques that are well-known in the art including, e.g., photolithographic techniques, wet chemical etching, reactive ion etching (RIE) and the like. Fabrication of polymeric substrates is generally carried out using known polymer fabrication methods, e.g., injection molding, embossing, or the like. In particular, master molds or stamps are optionally created from solid substrates, such as glass, silicon, nickel electro forms, and the like, using well-known micro fabrication techniques. These techniques include photolithography followed by wet chemical etching, LIGA methods, laser ablation, thin film deposition technologies, chemical vapor deposition, and the like. These masters are then used to injection mold, cast or emboss the channel structures in the planar surface of the first substrate surface. In particularly preferred aspects, the channel or chamber structures are embossed in the planar surface of the first substrate. Methods of fabricating and bonding polymeric substrates are described in commonly owned U.S. Patent Application No. 09/073,710, filed May 6, 1998, and incorporated herein by reference in its entirety for all purposes.

[0072] Further preferred aspects of the microfluidic devices of the present invention are more fully described in co-pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/238,467, as filed on January 28,

1999 (commonly assigned with the present application), the full disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. These preferred aspects include, for example, a reaction zone disposed within the overall body structure of the device, a reagent or other component of an “biochemical system” (generally referring to a chemical interaction that involves molecules of the type generally found within living organisms), sensing systems for detecting and/or quantifying the results of a particular reaction (often by sensing an optical or other detectable signal of the reaction), and the like.

[0073] Referring once again to Fig. 2, reservoirs 18 will often be defined by openings in an overlaying substrate layer. Reservoirs 18 are coupled together by channels 32 of microfluidic network 30, with the channels generally being defined by indentations in an underlying layer of the substrate, as was also described above.

[0074] Microfluidic channels 32 are in fluid communication with each other at channel intersections 34a, 34b, . . . (generally referred to as intersections 34). To simplify analysis of microfluidic network 30, channels 32 may be analyzed as channel segments extending between nodes defined at reservoirs 18 and/or channel intersections 34.

[0075] To provide enhanced control over movement of fluids within microfluidic network 30 by reducing the effects of secondary hydrostatic forces (such as capillary forces within reservoirs 18), the resistance of channels 32 to flow through the microfluidic network may be enhanced. These enhanced channel resistances may be provided by having a channel length greater than the normal separation between the nodes defining the channel segment, such as by having serpentine areas 36 along the channel segments. Alternatively, a cross-sectional dimension of the channel may be decreased along at least a portion of the channel, or flow may be blocked by a flow restrictor such as a local orifice, a coating or material disposed in the channel, or the like. In general, to take advantage of the full range of flow control provided by the pressure modulators, microfluidic device 12 should be optimized for hydrodynamic flow. Flow control is generally enhanced by providing sufficient flow resistance between each reservoir 18 and the adjacent nodes so as to allow a sufficient variation in flow rate to be achieved within the various channel segments given the dynamic operating pressure range of the pressure modulators.

[0076] Pressure manifold 28 can be seen more clearly in Figs. 3A and 3B. Manifold 28 has at least one device engaging surface 40 for engaging microfluidic device 12, with the engagement surface having an array of pressure lumens 42 corresponding to reservoirs 18 of the device. Each of pressure lumens 42 is in fluid communication with a fitting 44 for coupling each reservoir with an associated pressure modulator via an associated tube. Sealing body 46 helps maintain a seal

between the associated pressure modulator and reservoir, and manifold 28 is releasably secured to device 12 by a securing mechanism 48, which here includes openings for threaded fasteners, or the like.

[0077] Manifold 28 may comprise a polymer, a metal such as 6061-T6 aluminum, or a wide variety of alternative materials. Lumens 42 may have a dimension in a range from about 2 mm to about 3 mm. Fittings 44 optionally comprise standard 1/4-28 fittings. Sealing body 46 will often comprise an elastomer such as a natural or synthetic rubber.

[0078] The pressure transmission system (including manifold 28) will preferably maintain a seal when transmitting pressures greater than atmospheric pressure (positive gauge pressures) and less than atmospheric pressure (negative gauge pressures or vacuum). The pressure transmission system and modulator bank 14 will generally be capable of applying pressure differentials which are significantly higher than hydrostatic and capillary pressures exerted by, for example, a buffer or other fluid in reservoirs 18, so as to avoid variability or noise in the pressure differential and resulting flow rates. As capillary pressures within reservoirs 18 are typically less than 1/10 of a psi, often being less than 1/100th of a psi, the system will preferably be capable of varying pressure at reservoirs 18 throughout a range of at least 1/2 psi, more often having a pressure range of at least 1 psi, and most often having a pressure range of at least +/- 1 psig (so as to provide a 2 psi pressure differential.) Many systems will be capable of applying at least about a 5 psi pressure differential, optionally having pressure transmission capabilities so as to apply pressure anywhere throughout a range of at least about +/- 5 psig.

[0079] A control system for selecting the pressures applied to reservoirs 18 is schematically illustrated in Fig. 4. Controller 22 generally includes circuitry and/or programming which allows the controller to determine reservoir pressures which will provide a desired flow within a channel of microfluidic network 30 (here schematically illustrated as microfluidic network controller 52) and also includes circuitry and/or programming to direct the modulators of modulator bank 14 to provide the desired individual reservoir pressures (here schematically illustrated as a plurality of pressure controllers 54.) It should be understood that network controller 52 and pressure controller 54 may be integrated within a single hardware and/or software system, for example, running on a single processor board, or that a wide variety of distributing process techniques might be employed. Similarly, while pressure controllers 54 are schematically illustrated here as separate pressure controllers for each modulator, a single pressure controller might be used with data sampling and/or multiplexing techniques.

[0080] In general, pressure controller 54 transmits drive signals to an actuator 56, and the actuator moves a piston of displacement pump or syringe 58 in response to the drive signals. Movement of the piston within pump 58 changes a pressure in pressure transmission system 20, and the change in pressure is sensed by pressure sensor 24. Pressure sensor 24 provides a feedback signal to the pressure controller 54, and the pressure controller will optionally make use of the feedback signal so as to tailor the drive signals and accurately position the piston.

[0081] To enhance the time response of the pressure control system, pressure controller 54 may include pressure calibration data 60. The calibration data will generally indicate a correlation between drive signals transmitted to actuator 56 and the pressure provided from the pressure modulator. Pressure calibration data 60 will preferably be determined by initially calibrating the pressure change system, ideally before initiation of testing using the microfluidic network.

[0082] Generation of calibration data 60 may be effected by transmitting a calibration drive signal to actuator 56 and sensing the pressure response using pressure sensor 24. The change of pressure from this calibration test may be stored in the program as calibration data 60. The calibration signal will typically cause a known displacement of the piston within pump 58. Using this known displacement and the measured change in pressure, the overall pressure system response may be calculated for future drive signals using the ideal gas law, $PV = nRT$ (in which P is pressure, V is the total compressible air volume, n is the number of moles of gas in the volume, R is the gas constant, and T is the temperature). Calibration may be preformed for each modulator/pressure transmission systems/reservoir (so as to accommodate varying reagent quantities within the reservoirs, and the like), or may be preformed on a single reservoir pressurization system as an estimate for calibration for all of the modulators of the system.

[0083] Once calibration data 60 has been generated, pressure controller 54 can generate drive signals for actuator 56 quite quickly in response to a desired pressure signal transmitted from network controller 52. It should be noted that these estimate will preferably accommodate the changing overall volume of the compressible gas within the system, so that the calculated change in pressure for a given displacement of the piston within pump 58 at low pressures may be different than the same displacement of the piston at high pressures (i.e., the displacement/pressure correlation plot is not linear, but curves.)

[0084] In the exemplary embodiment, actuator 56 comprises a stepper motor coupled to a linear output mechanism. Pump 58 comprises a syringe having a length of about 100 mm, and a diameter of about 20 mm. Overall response time for the system may depend on a variety of

parameters, including dead volume, syringe size, and the like. Preferably, the response time will be less than about 1 sec/psi of pressure change, ideally being less than about 500 msec/psi for a pressure change from zero to 1 psi.

[0085] Network controller 52 generally calculates the desired pressure from each pressure modulator in response to a desired flow in one or more of the channels of microfluidic network 30. Given a desired channel flow, network controller 52 derives these pressures using network data 62, with the network data typically being supplied by either a mathematical model of the microfluidic network 64 and/or a tester 66. Network data 62 will generally indicate a correlation between pressure differentials applied to reservoirs 18 and flows within the microfluidic channels.

[0086] Network model 64 preferably comprises programming to help translate desired hydrodynamic flow rates into pressures to be applied at reservoirs 18. An exemplary network model 64 generates a hydrodynamic multi-level resistance network correlating to each microfluidic network 30, as can be understood with reference to Figs. 5A-5C.

[0087] Referring now to Figs. 5A and 2, nodes can be defined at each well 18 and at each intersection 34. Hydrodynamic resistances of channel segments coupling the nodes can be calculated from the chip design. More specifically, calculation of hydrodynamic resistances may be preformed using hydrostatic pressure loss calculations based on the cross sectional dimensions of channels 32, the length of channel segments connecting the nodes, the channel surface properties, the fluid properties of the fluids included in the flows, and the like.

[0088] Analysis of the multi-level flow resistance network may be performed using techniques often used for analysis of current in electrical circuits, as can be understood with reference to Figs. 5B-5C. Hydrodynamic resistances of the channel segments connecting reservoirs 18 to adjacent nodes may be analyzed as the lowest level of a multi-level network. The channel segments adjoining these lowest level segments form the second level of hydrodynamic resistances of the network. This level-by-level analysis continues until all channels of microfluidic network 30 are included in the network model. The relative flow rate of any channel in the microfluidic network can then be obtained once the flow rates from each of the reservoirs 18 in the lowest level have been calculated.

[0089] As described above, flow resistances maybe calculated based upon hydrodynamic chip design alone. It is also possible to measure these resistances using, for example, electrical sensors, pressure drop sensors, or the like. In other words, resistances to hydrodynamic flow of the channels and channel segments may be measured by, for example, measuring electrical resistance

between reservoirs 18 while a conductive fluid is disposed within the network. Regardless, once the channel resistances are known, the pressure drop in each channel segment in the network can be obtained by simply multiplying the flow rate of that channel with its associated channel resistance. The pressure of each reservoir 18 can then be calculated by summing up all the pressure drops along the network 30 starting at the top level of the network.

[0090] Referring now to the exemplary program for calculating pressures illustrated in Figs. 5B and 5C, hydrodynamic flow rate Q is related to flow resistance R_e and pressure differential ΔP by the equation:

$$\Delta P = Q \cdot R_e$$

This relationship is quite similar to that used in electrokinetic calculations, in which current I and electrical resistance R are related to voltage V by the equation:

$$V = I \cdot R$$

This simplifies the application of circuit analysis techniques to the hydrodynamic analysis.

[0091] Determination of reservoir pressures so as to provide a desired flow rate will preferably be performed using a pressure calculation program 70, as illustrated in Fig. 5C. Desired flow rates are input in step 72 from each reservoir 18. These flow rates may be input by the user, by an automated test matrix generation program, or the like. Flow resistances are obtained 74 as described above, and the input flow rate propagates through the network to obtain flow rates for each branch 76. The pressure drop of each branch is then determined using the network resistance circuit 78. These pressure branches are then allowed to propagate through the network to obtain reservoir pressures 80 so as to effect the desired flow.

[0092] Referring to Fig. 6, an alternative embodiment of a microfluidic system makes use of both electrokinetic transport and hydrodynamic transport mechanisms to move fluids within microfluidic channels of the system. Electrokinetic transfer of fluids has significant advantages when electro osmosis and/or electrophoresis are desired. Electrokinetic fluid transport is also both fast and convenient, and modifications of the channel surfaces are possible to avoid and/or alleviate electrokinetic transport disadvantages. The plug profiles of fluid plugs moved within a electrokinetic transport system can also be well-controlled and defined. As described in detail hereinbelow, controller 22 may be coupled to a sensor 154 for determining a viscosity of a sample fluid within the microfluidic network. Alternatively, a separate processor may be provided for calculating viscosities.

[0093] Electrokinetic/hydrodynamic system 90 also provides the advantages of hydrodynamic transport described above. This hydrodynamic transport is quite reliable, and is independent of charges and electrical surface properties of the channels. Hydrodynamic transport is particularly well-suited for biocompounds which are sensitive to electrical fields.

[0094] Electrokinetic/hydrodynamic microfluidic system 90 includes many of the pressurization, microfluidic network and control components described above. In this embodiment, manifold 92 includes fittings 44 opening laterally from the manifold to provide sealed fluid communication from each pressure transmission tube 20 to an associated reservoir 18 of the microfluidic device 12. Additionally, electrodes 94 are coupled to each reservoir 18 via manifold 92. In the exemplary embodiment, the electrodes comprise platinum surfaces which extend down from manifold 92 into electrical contact with fluids disposed within reservoirs 18 when the manifold provides a sealing engagement between fittings 44 and the reservoirs. Coupling of the electrodes with the fittings 44 may be provided by using "T" connectors within the manifold for each well, and inserting a platinum electrode across and through the "T". The appropriate (upper, in this example) connector branch of the T-connector can be sealed and the electrode affixed in place with a sealing material such as epoxy.

[0095] By coupling electrodes 94 to computer 22, and by including within computer 22 an electrokinetic fluid transport controller capable of inducing electro- osmosis and electrophoresis, the system of Fig. 6 is capable of emulating pumps, valves, dispensers, reactors, separation systems, and other laboratory fluid handling mechanisms, often without having to resort to moving parts on microfluidic device 12. Electrokinetic transportation and control are described in, for example, U.S. Patent No. 5,965,001, previously incorporated herein by reference.

[0096] One particular advantageous use of the pressure modulated flow control can be understood with reference to Figs. 7A and 7B. In many chemical analysis, it is desirable to vary the relative flow rates from two reservoirs connected to a common node so as to vary a concentration of a test solution, reagent, or the like, particularly for defining standard curves of chemical reactions. As illustrated in Fig. 7A, it is possible to vary the flows from two reservoirs electrokinetically, with the relative fluid concentrations being indicated by the changes in fluorescence intensity over time. Unfortunately, control over the relative flow rates (and hence, the concentration) may be less than ideal due to variation in capillary forces within the reservoirs and the like.

[0097] An alternative well-pair dilution plot in Fig. 7B can be generated by varying concentrations using multi-pressure control. This plot illustrates the reduced noise and enhanced

flow control provided by the pressure control systems of the present invention. As generally described above, hydrodynamic control can be enhanced by increasing resistance of the channel segments. In the exemplary microfluidic device 12 illustrated in Fig. 2, channels 32 coupling wells 18b, 18c, 18d, 18e, 18f, and 18g to the adjacent nodes have a resistance of $1.3 \times 10^{11} \text{ g/cm}^4 \text{ s}$. Channel 32 coupling reservoir 18a to the adjacent intersection 34 has a resistance of $4.8 \times 10^{10} \text{ g/cm}^4 \text{ s}$. Such a chip is well-suited for use with flows having a pressure drop between reservoirs of about 2 psi, so as to provide a mixing time of about 6 seconds, and a reaction time of about 20 seconds.

[0098] Fig. 7C is a plot of measured dilution vs. set dilution for a dilution well-pair with a hydrodynamic flow system, showing the accuracy and controllability of these dilution methods. Figs. 7D and 7E are plots of the measured dilution near the upper and lower extremes, respectively, showing that a small amount of mixing at a channel intersection may occur when flow from a channel is at least substantially halted. As can be understood with reference to these figures, some modification of the overall flow from one or more channels at an intersection may be used to effect a desired dilution percentage adjacent a maximum and/or a minimum of the dilution range. For example, relative flow adjustments within 5% of a maximum or minimum desired dilution, and often within 2.5% of a desired maximum and/or minimum may be employed. More specifically, to achieve a near 0% actual dilution from a given channel at an intersection, fluid may flow into the channel at the intersection. Similarly, to achieve 100% measured dilution from the channel, more than 100% of the desired flow may be provided from the supply channel into the intersection.

[0099] Characterization of an enzyme often involves determination of maximum reaction velocity and a Michaelis constant for each substrate. The enzymatic reaction of Alkaline Phosphatase on dFMUP (as illustrated in Fig. 8) was studied on a microfluidic device 12 optimized for pressure driven flow. Fig. 8A is a titration curve for different concentrations with and without substrate. A plot of background corrected signal vs. substrate concentration is shown in Fig. 8B, while a Lineweaver-Burk plot for the Michaelis constant (K_m) is provided in Fig. 8C. Results of a substrate titration assay for the reaction are shown in Fig. 8D.

[0100] Additional exemplary assay reactions, assay results, and microfluidic networks to provide those results are illustrated in Figs. 9A through 10B. More specifically, Figs. 9A-C illustrate the reaction and assay results for a Protein Kinase A (PKA) assay performed at different ATP concentrations. Fig. 10A illustrates a chip design having a microfluidic network 130 of microfluidic channels 32 connecting reservoirs 18, in which the network is adapted for a mobility

shift assay. Fig. 10B are exemplary results of a mobility shift assay at different concentrations of ATP as may be measured using the chip design of Fig. 10A.

[0101] Referring now to Figs. 11A and 11B, an exemplary manifold or chip interface structure 92' is illustrated in more detail. Exemplary manifold 92' is adapted to provide both hydrodynamic coupling and electrokinetic coupling between a microfluidic body and an associated controller, as described above. Electrical conduit passages 140 for coupling electrodes 94 to a system controller 22 (see Fig. 6) are illustrated in Fig. 11A. Fig. 11B illustrates manifold pressure transmission lumens 142 which provide fluid communication between fittings 44 and a microfluidic body interface surface 144 within manifold 92'. Manifold lumens 142 are illustrated in phantom.

[0102] Accurate control of the flow of fluids within a network of microfluidic channels can be quite challenging within even a relatively simple network of channels. More specifically, in many microfluidic applications, a variety of different fluids (with different characteristics) may be present in a single channel segment. As described above, where the hydro-resistance of each channel segment can be obtained, it may be possible to simulate and calculate the flow of fluids throughout the network for a given pressure configuration. Unfortunately, it can be quite difficult to accurately calculate viscosities (and, hence, resistances and flow rates) when several different buffers are used within a channel, often together with one or more different test fluid samples.

[0103] Fortunately, a relatively simple flow sensor can be provided to measure an actual flow within a channel of a microfluidic network. Where the measured flow results from a known driving force (such as a known pressure differential) can be determined, pressures to be applied at the fluid reservoirs so as to affect a desired flow condition may then be calculated.

[0104] Referring now to Fig. 12, a relatively simple viscometer 150 makes use of a channel intersection 152 at a first location and a detector 154 at a second location to measure fluid flow characteristics. In general, a steady-state flow within a microfluidic channel 32 between intersection 152 and sensor 154 may be produced using a pressure differential between reservoirs 18, as described above. Intersection 152 may impose a signal on the steady-state flow by applying a pressure pulse to one or more of the reservoirs 18, by applying an electrokinetic pulse across intersection 152, or the like. The signal imposed at intersection 152 will often be in the form of a small flow perturbation, typically for a short duration. For example, where reservoir 18d includes a detectable dye, the flow perturbation or signal may comprise an increase or decrease in the dye concentration in the flow of microfluidic channel 32 from intersection 152 toward detector 154.

[0105] Detector 154 is downstream from intersection 152, and can be used to detect the arrival time of the signal, for example, as a peak or dip in the intensity of a fluorescent signal from the dye. Thus, the time difference between imposition of the signal at intersection 152 and sensing of the signal flow at detector 154 may be readily measured. Calling this time differential Δt , and knowing the distance along channel 32 between intersection 152 and detector 154, Δd , from the microfluidic network geometry, the flow rate Q can be calculated from the equation:

$$Q = A(\Delta d / \Delta t)$$

in which A is the cross-sectional area of the channel. This measured flow rate of a steady-state flow for a given initial driving force greatly facilitates calculation of an appropriate pressure configuration to achieve a desired flow.

[0106] While the use of a pressure-controlled microfluidic flow generator (such as modulator bank 14) has significant advantages, alternative flow generators may be used. Volume-controlled microfluidic flow generators, for example, may also be used in a microfluidic system to measure viscosity. A constant (or otherwise controlled) volumetric flow may be driven through a channel segment of a microfluidic network using known nanoliter scale syringe pumps. By measuring the pressure differential ΔP along the segment, and using the known volumetric flow Q generated by the pump, the flow resistance through the segment may be calculated. Viscosity may be determined from known channel characteristics and the flow resistance, and/or may be derived using calibration data generated by driving reference fluids having known viscosities through the channel segment. Still further alternative flow generator means might be used, including capillary or spontaneous fluid injection, electrically induced flow, and the like.

[0107] Where viscosity is to be determined by the system of Fig. 12, reservoirs 18d and 18e coupled to channel 32 by intersection 152 may individually or in combination introduce fluid of known or unknown viscosity into the microfluidic channel at the intersection to provide a flow within the channel having an unknown total flow resistance. With channel 32 optionally containing only a trace amount of fluorescent dye (to inhibit any effect of the dye on the unknown overall viscosity), a substantially constant pressure configuration at ports 18 may drive flow from intersection 152 toward detector 154. This steady-state flow condition may be effected by a constant vacuum at reservoir 18a adjacent detector 154, positive pressures applied at reservoirs 18d, 18e adjacent intersection 152, or a combination of both. Regardless, the steady-state flow with a constant pressure differential will result in a volumetric flow rate Q in channel 32 which is linearly

proportional to the pressure differential ΔP and inversely proportional to the fluid viscosity η as follows:

$$Q = K \Delta P / \eta$$

K is a proportionality constant which depends on the geometry of the channel network. K can be calculated from the channel geometry, or can be determined through a calibration standard test, or the like.

[0108] When a pressure pulse is used to induce a flow perturbation giving rise to a fluorescence intensity perturbation in viscometer 150, symmetric pressure pulsing may be applied at reservoirs 18d and 18e such that the node pressure at 152 is unchanged to maintain a constant flow rate Q in channel 32 during the introduction of the dye pulse. This symmetric pulsing scheme mitigates the error in flow rate introduced by the perturbation. It also allows the use of a relative long pulse to provide a good signal-to-noise in the measured signal, even with a significant amount of flow-induced dispersion. An alternative embodiment is to use symmetric pressure stopping from reservoirs 18d and 18e. In this case, the flow from 18d steps down sharply in time as compensating flow from 18e steps up simultaneously. The total flow Q in channel 32 is maintained, and the fluorescent intensity goes up and down as a step function (rather than a pulse). The arrival time of the propagation front of the dye (at 50% height of the final intensity value, for instance) can be used to determine the time differential Δt .

[0109] A variety of alternative structures may be used to sense flow characteristics so as to apply a proper pressure configuration to generate a desired flow. For example, a signal may be imposed on a flow within a microfluidic channel by photobleaching of a fluorescent dye, rather than imposing a flow perturbation at an intersection. Alternative flow velocimetry approaches such as laser Doppler velocimetry, tracer particle videography, and the like are also possible. Using such techniques, a simple straight channel connecting a fluid supply reservoir and a waste fluid reservoir may suffice, with the fluid supply reservoir containing a fluid comprising a photobleachable fluorescent tracer dye or appropriate tracer particles.

[0110] As can be understood with reference to the calculations of flow rate Q above, sensors may also be used to determine alternative flow characteristics within a microfluidic channel, including flow rate, viscosity, the proportionality constant for a segment or network (by use of fluids having known and/or uniform viscosities) and/or other flow characteristics. In fact, in addition to providing a tool to study effective viscosity of two or more mixed fluids (of optionally

unequal viscosity) still further measurements are possible. Mixing of DMSO and an acquiesce buffer can yield a non-monotonic viscosity-composition relationship. By applying different levels of pressure differential ΔP and measuring the flow rate Q , viscometer 150 could be used to establish a relationship of the effective viscosity during mixing as a function of mixing length. This information may be pertinent to chip design for tests which involve geometric dilution.

[0111] Where temperature dependency of viscosity is of interest, systems such as viscometer 150 can be coupled to a temperature control system comprising an external heater block in contact with the body defining the microfluidic channel network, by using joule heating to selectively control the temperature of fluids within the channel network, or the like. In a still further alternative, a structure similar to viscometer 150 might be used to measure non-Newtonian viscosity. Non-Newtonian fluids have viscosities which are a function of the sheer rate experienced by the fluid. One example of a non-Newtonian fluid is a polymer solution containing high molecular weight molecules. A microfluidic viscometer similar to viscometer 150 of Fig. 12 might have a channel geometry and/or channel network intersection structure and/or flow arranged so that the application of a pressure differential creates a range of sheer stresses so as to accurately measure such non-Newtonian viscosity.

[0112] Real-time flow control and viscosity measurements for microfluidic systems based on transient pressure pulse techniques can be further understood with reference to Figs. 13A and 13B. A microfluidic network structure 30 with a single branch channel coupling each node to a main channel 32' is used. Each branch can be connected to a single reservoir 18 for a different buffer, sample, enzyme, or like. In the simplest embodiment, reservoir 18e at the end of the microfluidic channel network contains a dye solution to provide a detectable signal.

[0113] A steady flow can be directed toward reservoir 18a by applying initial pressures on wells 18. A short pressure pulse may be applied to well 18e and/or some or all of the other reservoirs of the microfluidic system. This pressure pulse will propagate substantially instantly to alter flow at some or all of the intersections 34 of network 30. This disturbance of the flow at the node points can change the dilution ratio from one or more of the side branches. After the pressure pulse, steady state flow is resumed.

[0114] As can be understood with reference to Fig. 13B, a time series of signals 160a, 160b, and 160c occur at times T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 , respectively. The flow rate from some or all of the side branches may then be obtained from the difference of flow rates between successive node points. Once the flow rates of the branches have been obtained, as the pressures at reservoirs 18 are known,

the resistances of the branch channels may then be calculated. From the known channel geometry, the viscosity of the solution mixtures in main channel 32' can be calculated once the viscosities of the solutions in the side branches connecting to reservoirs 18b, 18c, 18d, and 18e are known. This information can then be fed back to the network model to derive the pressures for a desired flow rate from each reservoir.

[0115] In addition to providing the benefit of flow rate control, the flow perturbation technique also facilitates measuring viscosities of solution mixtures. For the network shown in Fig. 13A, the transit time T_3 is a function of the viscosity of the mixture from 18d and 18e, T_2 is a function of the viscosity of the mixture from 18c, 18d, and 18e, and T_1 is a function of the viscosity of the mixture from 18b, 18c, 18d, and 18e. Therefore, the microfluidic structure 30 can be used as a viscometer for multi-component solution mixtures. The fluid mixtures are dispensed and mixed microfluidically within the network. The composition of the solution mixture in the main channel 32' can easily be varied by changing the pressures at the reservoirs thus changing the flow ratio from each side branch. Consequently, the complete behavior of viscosity as a function of composition can be mapped out relatively quickly with this method.

[0116] The design of a viscometer for solution mixtures can be further refined to take advantage of the symmetric pressure pulsing and symmetric pressure stepping techniques of the detectable fluid. An example microfluidic structure is shown in Fig. 13C for a 3-fluid system. In this structure, each fluid reservoir has a paired well containing the same fluid with trace fluorescent dye. Fluid 1 with and without dye can be loaded in reservoirs 18g and 18f, respectively, fluid 2 with and without dye in 18e and 18d, respectively, and fluid 3 with and without dye can be loaded in reservoirs 18c and 18b, respectively. As a pressure gradient is applied to induce flow toward reservoir 18a, symmetric pressure pulsing applied at each of the pairing reservoirs can be used to keep the node pressures at all channel intersections constant, thus maintaining constant flow rates and mixture composition in the main channel. The arrival times T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 of the pulses can be used to calculate mixture viscosities as discussed before. Alternatively, symmetric pressure stepping applied at each of the pairing reservoir yields the same advantages by analyzing the arrival times of the dye fronts rather than dye pulses.

[0117] Referring now to Figs. 14A and 14B, exemplary time signature data indicates that pressure pulse signals can effectively be imposed on the flow within a microfluidic system, and can accurately and repeatedly be sensed by a detector (such as an optical detector, or the like) for measurement of flow characteristics.

[0118] Hydrodynamic, electrokinetic, and other fluid transport mechanisms may be used in a variety of ways to provide specialized functions within a microfluidic system. For example, fluid mixtures such as biological fluid samples having particulates and/or cells in suspension within a liquid are often introduced into microfluidic systems. A particularly advantageous system and method for introducing a large number of samples into a microfluidic system is described in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,779,868 and 5,942,443, the full disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. In that system, a vacuum may be used to draw a sequential series of fluid samples from the wells of a multi-well plate into a capillary tube in fluid communication with the microfluidic system.

[0119] In the above-described system, it may be desirable to maintain fluids at a substantially stationary location within the microfluidic channel, for example, during the time delay while a sample in a last well of a first multi-well plate is moved away from the capillary tube and before a sample in a first well of a second multi-well plate is in fluid communication with the capillary tube. Maintaining the fluids within the microfluidic channel at a substantially fixed location can avoid introducing significant amounts of air into the microfluidic system, which might interfere with its operation. In general, it may be desirable to maintain fluid mixtures at a given location within a microfluidic network for a wide variety of reasons.

[0120] Unfortunately, work in connection with the present invention has found that halting movement of some fluid mixtures within a microfluidic network may have significant disadvantages. Specifically, cell-based assays performed using a fluid mixture including cells suspended in a liquid are susceptible to sticking of the cells to the channel walls if flow is completely halted. Similarly, other fluids may deteriorate if flow within the channel is sufficiently low for a sufficient amount of time.

[0121] To avoid deterioration of fluid mixtures, the present invention can provide a small amplitude oscillatory movement of a fluid mixture so as to maintain the fluid mixture within a microfluidic channel. Modulator bank 14 is capable of providing a small amplitude oscillatory pressure such that there is no significant inflow or outflow of materials from the channel. This small amplitude oscillatory pressure will preferably be sufficient to continuously move the fluid mixture (and, for example, the cells within the liquid) continuously back and forth. The oscillation frequency should be high enough such that the instantaneous fluid mixture velocity is sufficiently high to avoid deterioration of the mixture, while amplitude should be small enough such that there is little or no unintended net transportation into or out of the channel from adjacent reservoirs,

reservoirs and intersecting channels. Once the desired delay in fluid mixture movement has been provided it will often be desirable to flow an intervening liquid such as a buffer into the channel to help insure that unintended flows and/or mixtures at the channel ends have been flushed.

[0122] It should be noted that this small amplitude oscillatory motion may optionally be provided using electrokinetic forces, such as providing an alternating current, particularly if the alternating current is not harmful to cells or other components of the fluid mixture. It may also be beneficial to insure that cells in the channel do not lyse when subjected to the alternating current if electrokinetic forces are to be used to induce the oscillatory motion.

[0123] Referring now to Fig. 15, the systems and methods described above may optionally take advantage of a wide variety of pressure transient generators so as to initiate a flow perturbation. A multiple capillary assembly 170 includes a microfluidic body or chip 172 mounted a polymer interface housing 174. A plurality of capillaries 176 contain fluid introduction channels. As explained in detail in U.S. Patent No. 6,149,787, the full disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference, the capillary channels can be used to spontaneously inject fluids into the microfluidic network of chip 172 using capillary forces between the injected fluid and the capillary channels. Such spontaneous injection is sufficient to induce a pressure transient for measurement of hydrodynamic and/or electrokinetic flow. Such flow measurements allow the derivation of information regarding the properties of the chip, microfluidic network, and/or fluids.

[0124] The use of multiple capillary assembly 170 is beneficial for parallel assays using a plurality of test samples, and the like. Referring now to Fig. 16, a simple chip 178 having a relatively straightforward microfluidic network may be used to understand the derivation of flow and/or chip properties from spontaneous injection. In many embodiments, the open end of capillary 176 will be placed in a fluid, typically by introducing the end of the capillary into a microtiter plate (or any other structure supporting one or more fluid test samples). This may be effected by moving the capillary 176 and chip 178 relative to the microtiter plate, by moving the microtiter plate relative to the capillary or by moving both structures relative to each other. Regardless, placing capillary 176 into a fluid results in spontaneous introduction of the fluid into the capillary channel. By applying a constant vacuum on at least one well of the microfluidic system, a steady flow may then be provided along a channel coupling the capillary to the well.

[0125] If, for example, a steady-state flow is induced from capillary 176, a substrate reservoir 180a, and/or an enzyme reservoir 180b toward a vacuum reservoir or waste well 180c along a channel 182, a flow perturbation can be initiated at intersection 186 between the capillary

channel and the microfluidic network at the time the capillary is withdrawn out from the well containing the introduced fluid. This flow perturbation may, for example, comprise a change in composition of the flow progressing along channel 182 toward vacuum reservoir 180c. This change in composition may be sensed at a detection location 184 as, for example, a change in fluorescent intensity. Similar flow perturbations might be induced by applying other pressure transients at intersection 186, for example, when capillary 176 is introduced into the spontaneously injected fluid, or by applying a change in pressure using a pressure modulation pump as described above, again changing the composition of the flow within channel 182. By monitoring the property of the composition at detection point 184, progress of the perturbations may be detected. A time delay between initiation of the perturbation and their respective detections at the detection point, when combined with a known length of channel 182, can be used to determine a speed of the flow within the channel. From this actual, real-time speed, a variety of information regarding the fluid and/or network system may be determined.

[0126] Referring now to Figs. 16A and 16B, each time capillary 176 is dipped into and are removed from a fluid well, a perturbation will be generated at a capillary intersection 186 coupling the capillary channel with the microfluidic network. Additionally, as the pressure perturbation will propagate throughout the microfluidic network, another flow perturbation may be simultaneously initiated at a second intersection 186a downstream of the sipper intersection 186. If we assume that fluid is flowing from reservoirs affixed to the microfluidic network toward a vacuum reservoir 180c, the pressure transient applied by spontaneous injection at capillary 176 will alter the mixtures occurring at each intersection.

[0127] Where the channel lengths may be designated, and Δd_1 , Δd_2 a time delay may be measured at detector 184 between initiation of the pressure transient (at $t = 0$) and sensing of a first flow perturbation as a signal 188a at detector 184. The first signal 188a may be said to have occurred after a time delay of Δt_1 , with this time being the time required for flow to propagate from the intersection immediately upstream of detector 184. A similar time delay Δt_2 will then be required for the flow to propagate from the second upstream intersection (186 in the simple network of Fig. 16A). Where the channel lengths between intersection are known, the various time delays can be used to determine the various fluid speeds between intersections. Where the channel cross-sections are known, this information can be used to determined contributions from branch channels to the flow volume, and the like, regardless of whether the flows throughout the microfluidic system are induced hydrodynamically, electrokinetically, electroosmotically, or the like.

[0128] Referring now to Fig. 16C, capillary 176 may be dipped into and removed from a variety of fluids in a sequential series. P indicates pressure, S₁ is a signal indicating a flow perturbation caused at a first intersection by spontaneous injection into the capillary, and signals S₂ indicates a flow perturbation signal generated at a second intersection by the same spontaneous injection at the capillary. A series of pressure transients 190 will be generated by capillary 176 when the capillary is, for example, dipped into and removed from a dye, followed by dipping of the capillary into a buffer solution, followed dipping of the capillary into a first test substance well, and the like. This sequence of spontaneous injection events at capillary 176 may result in generation of a series of S₁ signals due to a series of flow perturbations at, for example, intersection 186a. Simultaneously, a series of second flow perturbation signals S₂ will also be generated at intersection 186, with detection of the second series following the first series by a time delay Δt_2 which is dependent on the speed of fluid within the network channels. The total signal S_t measured at detector 184 will be a combination of this offset series of signals with the more immediate S₁ signals. Furthermore, the composition of the overall flow arriving at the detector may vary significantly with the different materials introduced by capillary 176. Regardless, by properly identifying the time delays between signals, flows between the nodes of the microfluidic system may be calculated.

[0129] Referring now to Fig. 16A, placing a detector 184a downstream of an electrode v₁ may facilitate measurements of electrically induced flow, such as electroosmotic flows induced by a differential voltage between V₁ and V₂. As described above, pressure perturbations will be initiated at the channel intersections, so that an initial signal may be generated at the detector from the downstream electrode V₁, followed by another signal generated at the upstream electrode V₂. Setting Δt_1 , as the time delay between these electrode intersections and Δt_2 , as the time delay for a subsequent signal generated by a reaction channel at intersection 186, and knowing the lengths of the channels Δd_1 , Δd_2 we can calculate the electroosmotic EO flow as follows:

[0130] With voltage between the electrodes off, using only pressure to drive fluids within the network, we can determine velocities along the channels between nodes caused by pressure v_{1P}, v_{2P} from:

$$\frac{\Delta t_2}{\Delta d_2} = v_{2P} \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\Delta t_1}{\Delta d_1} = v_{1P}$$

While leaving the same pressure differential on, the voltage differential may then be turned on, allowing us to calculate the electroosmotic flow velocity as follows:

$$\frac{\Delta t_2^1}{\Delta d_2} = v_{2p} \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\Delta t_1^1}{\Delta d_1} = v_{1p} + v_{eo} \quad ; \text{ which gives us}$$

$$v_{eo} = \frac{\Delta t_1^1 - \Delta t_1}{\Delta d_2}$$

[0131] This electroosmotic velocity may then be used to calculate electroosmotic mobility

using the equation: $\mu_{eo} = \frac{v_{eo}}{E_1}$, in which E_1 is the electric field strength between the first and

second voltages V_1, V_2 . Fig. 19 graphically illustrates data from a detector or sensor from which the time delays discussed above may be taken.

[0132] The multiple capillary assembly and simplified capillary networks of Figs. 15, 16 and 16A are examples of microfluidic devices which might benefit from monitoring of pressure induced flow perturbations for analysis and/or control of flows, quality control, and the like. Additional examples of microfluidic structures which may benefit from these techniques are illustrated in Figs. 17A, 17B, 18A and 18B.

[0133] Referring now to Figs. 17A and 17B, more complex microfluidic networks may include a plurality of capillary joints or intersections 192 and substrate wells or reservoirs 194, enzyme wells 196, wastewells 198, and the like. One or more detection or sensor windows or locations 200 may be provided for monitoring of propagation of the flow perturbations. The microfluidic assembly and network of Figs. 17A and 17B may be useful for multi-capillary fluorogenic assays. A multi-capillary basic mobility-shift microfluidic assembly and network having similar structures is illustrated in Figs. 18A and 18B. This structure also includes a plurality of electrode wells 202 for applying voltages to the microfluidic network, as described above.

[0134] Accurate control of the flow perturbation pulse may be challenging, particularly where the pulse comprises a step-function change in flow. To decrease noise in measurements, and to generally enhance viscosity measurement accuracy and/or enhance measurement range, it may be beneficial to separate a flow having the perturbation (typically at an intersection within the network)

into a plurality of separated flows. A first separated flow might advance along a first separated flow channel, while a second separated flow advances along a second separated flow channel having dimensions (and thus a transit time) different than that of the first separated flow channel. As the channel fabrication tolerances may be better controlled than the pulse, comparison of the transit times through the different channels may allow the magnitude of a step-function pulse to be determined, and thereby allow more accurate viscosity calculations to be made.

[0135] Referring now to Fig. 20, a simple microfluidic network 220 for determining a viscosity of a fluid sample is shown schematically. Network 220 includes a sample fluid source 222 which supplies sample fluid to a first flow-resisting channel segment 224. A detectable fluid source 226 is coupled to first segment 224 at an intersection 228 via a second flow-resisting channel segment 230. A sensor or detector 154 is disposed downstream of intersection 228, with the fluid from the sources eventually flowing to a waste well 232 or the like.

[0136] In network 220 shown in Fig. 20, the fluid sources and waste well may comprise simple ports or reservoirs as described above. By using this simple arrangement with three wells and a single intersection, viscosities of sample fluids may be determined without mixing the sample fluid with a dye or other detectable substance in such a manner as to alter the viscosity to be measured. Specifically, the channels of network 220 may be completely (often filled using capillary action) with a reference fluid having a known viscosity. The reference fluid used to initially fill the channels of the network may be free from dyes or other detectable substances. The fluid sample may be introduced into sample fluid source 222, and reference fluid having a detectable substance such as a dye may be introduced into detectable fluid source 226. A flow of the fluids within the network may be generated toward waste well 222, for example, by applying a steady vacuum at the waste well.

[0137] Referring now to Figs. 20, 21A and 21B, where the reference and detectable fluid have similar viscosities, the dilution of the dye-free reference fluid initially used to fill the channels of network 220 may first be determined by the relative hydrodynamic resistances of the first and second channel segments 224, 230 (the parallel sections of the network circuit), as described below. This may result in a substantially steady signal at the detector 154 after initiation of the flow, (with the baseline signal shown in the figures being generated prior to any flow of the detectable fluid past the detector). Optionally, this initial calibration flow may proceed with reference fluid disposed within sample fluid source 222, and/or with the detectable fluid pre-filling second segment 230. Regardless, this initial flow may be dominated by the flow resistance of the reference fluid

within the first channel segment and the detectable fluid within the second channel segment so as to produce a steady reference signal, as schematically shown in Figs. 21A and 21B.

[0138] As a significant portion of the sample fluid is drawn into the first channel segment 224, the ratio between the resistance the first channel segment to the reference fluid and the resistance of the first channel segment to the flow of the sample fluid therein is altered. This results in more or less dye (or other detectable fluid) entering the flow at intersection 228. For example, if the fluid sample is more viscous than the reference fluid initially disposed within the first channel segment 224, the signal will increase at detector 154. This change in signal at the detector results from the change in the percentage of detectable fluid in the combined flow at the detector. As illustrated in Fig. 21A, in our example of a sample fluid having a viscosity higher than that of reference fluid, the signal at detector 154 will increase due to this increased percentage or ratio of detectable fluid at the detector. Similarly, in the case of a sample fluid which is less viscous than the reference fluid, overall resistance of the first channel segment 224 to the flow there through will decrease, and less detectable fluid will be present in the flow at detector 154, resulting in a reduction in the signal generated by detector 154, as illustrated in Fig. 21B. Hence, the relative viscosity of the sample fluid may be determined by comparison to the flow characteristics of the reference fluid. The signals illustrated for Figs. 21A and 21B may be any appropriate detector signal units, and are schematically shown as Reference Fluorescent Units (“RFU”), as might be appropriate for the use of a fluorescent dye in the detectable fluid. Suitable reference fluids might include, for example, aqueous solutions of ethylene glycol having known concentrations, thereby providing known viscosities from about 1 to about 15 cp. For many embodiments, suitable reference fluids may comprise (or be composed of) water with one or more dye (optionally being diFMU or Fluorescein), a buffer (optionally being a well-known buffer such as HEPES, TRIS, or CAPS at an appropriate pH for the associated dye) and a dye, or the like. Suitable reference fluids may also comprise (or be composed of) a National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) (or other standard regulating body) certified viscosity standard, which are generally oils having a known viscosity at a given temperatures. Such viscosity standards are commercially available, and are used for calibration of traditional viscometers.

[0139] It should be recognized that the schematic graphs shown in Figs. 21A and 21B are simplification. Changes in the signal may begin immediately and/or gradually as the sample fluid enters the flow-resisting segment, and the signal need not be linear.

[0140] From the above, it can be understood that the viscosity of the sample may be analyzed as a function of the slope of the fluorescent signal, with positive slopes representing samples that are more viscous than the reference, and negative slopes representing samples that are less viscous than the reference fluid. The relationship between viscosity and the slope of the fluorescence signal will typically not be linear. Nonetheless, the relationship is generally reproducible, so that the relationship can be mapped by fitting a curve (such as a polynomial, an exponential expression, or the like) to the viscosity/signal slope data. The relationship can generally be trendfitted/overlayed on calibration or other measurement data to allow the viscosity to be determined as a function of the signal slope. Still further approaches might be used, including generation of a look-up table and the like.

[0141] Still further related methods may be used to determine the viscosity from a sensor signal. For example, as the sample fluid and detectable fluid from the sources fill the channel network and achieve steady state flow, the signal from detector 154 should likewise level off. Hence, the viscosity of the sample fluid may be determined in response to the change in slope of the signal prior to achieving steady-state flow, and/or by using the eventual steady-state signal.

[0142] Determination of the viscosity of the sample fluid might be performed using the relative volumetric flow rates through the flow-resisting channel segments as related to fluid viscosity in the equations given above. However, actual resistances to flows within a microfluidic network may be quite sensitive to channel dimensions. Processing and fabrication capabilities may, in turn, limit how tightly the dimensions or tolerances of a particular chip are constrained. As a result, accuracy of viscosity measurement will often benefit significantly from at least one calibration measurement.

[0143] Viscosity measurement accuracy will typically be enhanced by taking a plurality of calibration measurements for a specific network, the measurements generally being taken with fluids at a plurality of different known viscosities. As the signal will often vary with changes in viscosity with a non-linear relationship, three or more calibration measurements may be taken with each chip, typically from three to seven measurements. From a plurality of signal slopes or other measurements taken with reference fluids having known viscosities, a calibration curve can be established, and an equation determined fitting the fluid-flow and signal response for a particular microfluidic chip and its network. Measurements taken with the sample fluid will then provide a fluorescence signal (or other) response which can be mapped onto the calibration curve to determine the sample viscosities. Using this reference fluid-based approach the involved

calculations may comprise (or even be limited to) derivation of the calibration curve from measurements taken with reference fluids, together with mapping of measurements taken with sample fluids onto the calibration curve to determine sample viscosity.

[0144] A number of network design variations around the general microfluidic viscometer concept described above may be implemented. In some embodiments, alternative (and in some cases slightly more complicated) viscometer channel networks may provide a larger possible dynamic range, enhanced accuracy, greater ease of use, or the like. One alternate viscometry network channel 240 is illustrated in Fig. 22. Network 240 includes many of the components described above regarding network 220, with the flow path coupling the sample fluid source 222 to intersection 228 here comprising a first segment portion 242, a second segment portion 244, and a third segment portion 246. The hydrodynamic resistance of the channel segment portion 244 has been locally enhanced, so that the majority of the flow-resistance of the sample fluid between the sample fluid source 222 and the intersection 228 is imposed along the second channel segment portion 244. This may be effected by altering the depth of the channel along this segment portion, altering the width of the channel segment along this portion, by placing a flow occluding structure within the channel along this segment portion, or the like. Optionally, the bulk of the resistance may be localized within a relatively short channel length, for example, by taking advantage of the strong dependence of the hydrodynamic resistance on the channel depth, and by locally decreasing that channel depth.

[0145] As can be understood with reference to Figs. 23A and 23B, locally enhancing hydrodynamic resistance R_2 along second channel segment portion 244 may help to provide signals from detector 154 which do not change significantly until the flow front has entered and/or filled channel segment 244. After a steeply ramped change in signal, little additional change in the detector signal will occur, assuming that R_2 is much larger than R_3 or R_1 . Hence, the signal response to the network 240 would substantially be in a form of a stair step, in which the magnitude of the step is proportional to (or otherwise a function of) the viscosity, with samples having greater viscosity than a reference fluid generating an increased signal as illustrated in Fig. 23A, while sample fluids having a lower viscosity than the reference fluid generating a stair-step down signal as illustrated in Fig. 23B.

[0146] It may be advantageous to enhance the dynamic range of a microfluidic viscosity measurement system as can be understood with reference to Figs. 24 and 25. In network 250 of Fig. 24, a series of flow resisting channel segments 224a, 224b, 224c are aligned in series. Detectable

fluid sources 226a, 226b, 226c are coupled to the series flow path by associated channel segments 230a, 230b, 230c at associated intersections 228a, 228b, 228c. This series of hydrodynamic resistors of the sample fluid flow can result in a series of signal plateaus as the sample passes each sequential intersection. By analyzing the relative plateau levels, it will be possible to determine viscosity of the sample fluid, potentially over several orders of magnitude. While three detectable fluid branch channels are shown, two or more may also be used.

[0147] In one exemplary embodiment, detectable fluid source 226a and its associated channel of components may provide for detection of viscosities in a range from about 1 to about 10 cp. Similarly, a second detectable fluid source 226b may be used for detection of viscosities in a range from about 10-100 cp, while a third detectable fluid source may provide viscosities in a range from about 100-1000 cp. The variation in sensing range associated with the different detectable fluid sources, is enhanced by the differences in percentage change of flow at the different intersections. Differing side resistances and/or differing detectable fluids having differing signatures (as discussed below regarding Fig. 25), differing detectable fluid viscosities from the differing detectable fluid sources, and the like may also be employed.

[0148] Another wide dynamic range network 260 is illustrated in Fig. 25. In this embodiment, a first detectable fluid source 262 includes a first detectable fluid (for example, a dye having a first color signal) and a second detectable fluid source 224, having a second independently detectable fluid (for example, having a dye with a second color signal). Detectable fluid sources 262, 264 are coupled to the first flow-resisting channel segment 224 by a second channel segment 266, and a third channel segment 268, respectively. Segment 266 has a significantly lower hydrodynamic resistance to flow of the first detectable fluid than segment 268 has to flow of the second detectable fluid therethrough. When a vacuum is drawn at waste well 232, a mixture ratio between the sample fluid from sample fluid source 222, and the first detectable fluid may indicate viscosities in a relatively low range (for example, 1-10 cp), while mixing of the sample fluid with the second detectable fluid may indicate viscosities throughout a higher viscosity rating (for example, throughout a range of 10-100 cp). Hence, by simply using (for example) dyes having different color together with side channel segments having varying fluidic resistances, the microfluidic viscometry range can be significantly enhanced.

[0149] In another embodiment, the viscometer 220 can be used to measure the viscosity of a sample fluid that is immiscible with the detectable fluid. The flow rate of the sample fluid through the capillary is influenced by its viscosity as well as the surface tension properties between the two

fluids. The pressure differential across the immiscible fluid interface is determined at least in part by the interfacial tension, the contact angle with the capillary wall, and the radius of the capillary. It is therefore possible to measure interfacial properties between immiscible liquids in addition to sample viscosity by monitoring the changes in the fluorescence intensity signal as a function of time, which is indicative of the sample flow rate as discussed earlier.

[0150] Referring back to Figs. 20 and 6, independent pressure control provided by modulators 14 may also be used to determine viscosity using feedback from sensor 154. A quantity of a sample fluid having an unknown viscosity may be introduced to reservoir 222, through a capillary 176, or the like. Reference fluid may optionally be introduced before and after the sample fluid to produce a “plug” of sample fluid in channel 224, and the viscosity of the sample fluid within the network will affect relative flows at intersections upstream and/or downstream of the plug. A feedback control loop from sensor 154 to pressure modulators 14 allows pressures from port 226 to be adjusted until a desired signal response is achieved. For example, when the plug is first introduced into the main channel, the signal from a dye flowing from reservoir 226 will increase in slope if the plug has a high viscosity. Pressure at reservoir 226 might be decreased until the signal response is flat again. By knowing how much the pressure was changed and the geometry of the chip, one can determine how much the sample fluid has changed the flow resistance in the network, and can thereby determine viscosity of the sample fluid.

[0151] Referring now to Fig. 26, the use of microfluidic viscometry in a high-throughput system can be understood. High-throughput microfluidic systems and methods are more fully described in PCT Publication No. WO 00/10015, the full disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. In simple terms, a microfluidic body 270, having channel walls defining the channels of a microfluidic network is coupled to a capillary 272 for entering sample fluids 274a, 274b, and 274c. . . in the channel network. The sample fluids may be disposed in the wells of a microtiter plate 276, with the plate (and/or microfluidic body 270) being moved robotically so as to sequentially introduce the sample fluids through capillary 272. High-throughput systems may also be multiplexed so as to simultaneously determine a plurality of viscosities, optionally with a plurality of capillaries extending from a single body.

[0152] To account for variation between capillaries (differences in diameter, coupling of the capillary to the microfluidic network, and the like) it may be advantageous to calibrate the viscosity measurements by introducing a reference fluid from a well of microtitre plate 276. In some embodiments, the bulk of the fluidic resistance may be incorporated in the microfluidic body (rather

than the capillary) to reduce the sensitivity of a high-throughput system and method to capillary variability, capillary junction connection variability, and the like.

[0153] A variety of alternative microfluidic networks might be used to measure viscosity and/or other fluid characteristics. For example, a microfluidic analogy of a Wheatstone bridge might be fabricated, with the electrical resistors of this known circuit replaced by flow-resisting channel segments. Using the concepts described above, viscosity might be determined by comparatively measuring flow resistance through a segment of such a network in a manner analogous to the well-known comparative methods used for electrical resistance measurements in the Wheatstone bridge circuit. Such a microfluidic network may be particularly well-suited for viscosity measurements of fluid mixtures, and may also facilitate viscosity measurements throughout a range of dilutions. Other fluid characteristics might also be measure in such a network, including electrical conductivity or the like.

[0154] As can be understood from the network design tools described above, a channel simulation program may be helpful in optimizing potential microfluidic viscometer body designs. Calibrations data for a specific microfluidic network may enhance measurements accuracy, as is also explained above. Figs. 27-33 show measurements and simulated data of viscosities as measured with the microfluidic techniques described herein. Specifically, Fig. 27 shows measurement data generated using a microfluidic chip (NS71, fabrication by Caliper Technologies Corp. of Mountain View, California) by “sipping” (introducing via a capillary 272) sequential 20-second flows of sample fluids having varying viscosities. The sample fluids for these measurements were solutions of ethylene glycol varying from 0 to 100%, providing viscosities varying from about 1 to about 15 cp. Fig. 28 shows corresponding data generated by a computer model or simulation of this microfluidic system.

[0155] Figs. 29 and 30 show measurement data and simulation data, respectively, for a single 20-second sip a 10% ethylene glycol solution. Arrows 280 indicate spontaneous injection of the sample within the capillary due to capillary forces. Viscosity measurements may be based at least in part on the rate of change of the fluorescence (in this case, the increase) when sipping the sample fluid. Measurement data for a rate of change or slope for a 20-second sip of 40% ethylene glycol is shown in Fig. 31, while corresponding simulation data is shown in Fig. 32. The initial change in fluorescence may be the maximum if any errors resulting from spontaneous injection are neglected. These graphs were again generated using the NS71 chip.

[0156] Information from three measurements for the various titrations of ethylene glycol are summarized in Fig. 33. As the viscosities of the samples are known, these measurements allow a calibration curve to be determined for the chip. Measurement data from the calibrated chip can be referenced to the calibration curve to determine viscosity. For example, if a sample material results in a fluorescence slope of 0.06, the curve indicates that the sample material has a viscosity of about 4.5 cp.

[0157] Three curves are shown in Fig. 33, with each curve being generated for an associated experiment. The reproducibility of the experiments is indicated by the correspondence of the curves. Sensitivity is higher at the lower viscosities as there is a more significant separation in slopes for a given change in viscosity. Accurate viscosity measurement range may be enhanced by the structures and methods described above. The simulation results deviate somewhat from the measurement data, which may (at least in part) result from actual channel dimensions, channel surfaces, capillary dimensions, capillary/chip joints, and the like, which vary from the computer model.

[0158] It should be understood that the various embodiments of methods and structures described herein will often be combined. For example, dilution and/or fluid combination structures and methods may be combined in a microfluidic network with viscometer structures and methods, allowing fluid mixtures to be characterized as a function of their composition. Mixtures will often include more than two fluids, and the ability to controllably mix three or more, five or more, and/or ten or more fluids in a controlled manner within the network allows complex studies to be performed quickly and with small fluid volumes. Measured fluid flow, measured flow times, and/or viscometry information derived from the network will, as noted above, often be used by the fluid flow generator control system to control the flow of fluids within the network via a feedback control loop. Similarly, computer simulations of networks may be combined with flow times and other flow measurement data to enhance feedback control of flows within the network.

[0159] While the viscosity measurement structures described herein have generally, for purposes of illustration, made use of pressure differential, similar microfluidic systems might make use of other flow generating systems within a microfluidic environment for determining viscosities of small quantities of sample fluids. In general, while the exemplary embodiments have been described in some detail, by way of example and for clarity of example, a variety of modifications, changes, and adaptation will be obvious to those of skill in the art. Hence, the scope of the present invention is limited solely by the appended claims.